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During Holidays and Always, Sleep in Heavenly Peace

**By Melanie Reynolds
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“It’s the most wonderful time of the year” – but sometimes that’s hard to remember in the frenzy of shopping, cooking, traveling, decorating, mailing, and celebrating that are part and parcel of a happy holiday season.

Let’s face it, the holidays may be wonderful, but they aren’t exactly restful! We burn the candles at both ends, sacrificing sleep in order to squeeze holiday preparations into our already busy lives. Is it any wonder we sometimes don’t feel “joyful and triumphant?”

Sleep is probably the most underrated aspect of a healthy lifestyle. It’s vital to our well being, both physically and mentally. It affects almost every tissue in the body.

Sleep is not a waste of time. During slumber, our bodies repair cells, build muscle, integrate new ideas and experiences, and metabolize fat. Sleep helps us think more clearly, have quicker reflexes, focus better, feel less stressed, and be more productive.

Sleep and Chronic Disease

Lack of sleep also has been linked to a number of chronic diseases and conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, obesity, and depression. It harms our immune system, making us more prone to diseases like cold and flu. Recent studies have even found that being sleep deprived can affect our response to vaccines, according to the National Institutes of Health. Since the immune system is suppressed, the body is slower to build up protection against disease.

Sleep deprivation also contributes to traffic accidents, one of the leading causes of death in our state and county. Studies have found that people who don’t get enough sleep are just as dangerous on the road as someone who’s drunk.

According to the state health department, about 27% of Montana adults report not getting enough sleep. A Boston sleep specialist claims that 10 times as many people today are sleeping less than six

hours a night compared to a generation ago. I would bet a box of bonbons that those numbers climb even higher each December!

How much sleep we need varies from person to person, but most adults need about 7-9 hours. School-aged children and teens need about 10 hours.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that sleep in childhood and adolescence is particularly important for brain development. And insufficient sleep can harm the part of the brain that regulates appetite and metabolism, leading to weight gain. One study found that lack of sleep was a bigger contributor to childhood obesity than any other factor.

Tips for Sound Slumber

Good bedtime practices can help us “sleep in heavenly peace.”

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Exercise daily, but not right before bedtime.
- Avoid large meals before bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and cool.
- Remove all TVs, computers, and other electronic gadgets from your bedroom, and limit the use of them before bed.
- Make sure your bed is comfortable.

If you continue to have trouble sleeping, consult a professional to find out if you have an ongoing sleep problem like insomnia, sleep apnea, or restless leg syndrome. Before visiting your health-care provider, it can help to keep a diary of your sleep habits for about 10 days. Keep track of when you go to bed, fall asleep, wake up, get out of bed, take naps, exercise, and drink alcohol or caffeinated beverages. Then take it with you to discuss with your health-care provider.

Good sleep is critical to your health. The good news is that you can repair the damage from insufficient sleep fairly quickly – by ensuring that you get enough sleep on a regular basis.

So here’s my prescription for coping with the holidays: sleep eight hours and feel more festive in the morning!